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THE UNITED STATES AND CUBA: TIME FOR A NEW BEGINNING

Report of a Trip to Cuba

November 24-28, 1988

A REPORT

TO THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE

BY

SENATOR CLAIBORNE PELL

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PREFACE

This report is based on my recent trip to Cuba (November 24 to 28), during which substantive talks were conducted with President Fidel Castro, Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Minister of Education, Jose Fernandez, Vice Foreign Minister Jose Viera, and with other ranking officials responsible for foreign trade, public health, and religious affairs. I met also with the Chargé of the Vatican Pro-Nunciature, leaders of the Catholic Church and Protestant churches, as well as of the Jewish Community. I visited the Combinado del Este prison, where I spent time with the remaining nine "plantados" (long-term political prisoners), and observed present conditions. During this brief but fully scheduled stay, I was able to observe a bit of Cuba today, both in Havana and in the countryside. I come away from this trip with high praise for the work of John Taylor and the staff of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, who labor under difficult circumstances created by the long-time strained United States relationship with Cuba. Most importantly, I return from Cuba with the hope that in the not too distant future, there will be a real improvement in relations that have been so hostile for almost 30 years.

CLAIBORNE PELL,
Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is an appropriate time to move toward a more rational and normalized relationship with Cuba, given the improved international climate characterized by the pending Cuban withdrawal of troops from Angola and warming relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. Fidel Castro and other ranking Cuban officials reacted positively to my suggestion that the United States and Cuba should talk with each other about mutually beneficial steps that can be taken to create the climate in which the more difficult issues on the United States-Cuba agenda can be resolved.

Based on my discussions in Cuba, I am suggesting the following recommendations: Cuba release the "plantados" (long-term political prisoners) and the other political prisoners; the United States lift the embargo on medicines and medical supplies; Cuba permit access to the American/Cuban dual nationals held in prison; both countries facilitate cultural and other exchanges, liberalize visa and travel policy; Cuba continue positive developments in human rights and grant official status to human rights groups; both countries facilitate increased contact between Cuban exiles and family members in Cuba; the United States and Cuban Coast Guard increase cooperation, including narcotics interdiction; Cuba adhere to the Neutrality Treaty governing the Panama Canal; the United States and Cuba resume broadcast interference talks; the United States reconsider the TV Marti project; both nations begin talks on nuclear safety and environmental issues.

In our own foreign policy interests, we should be working toward a better relationship with Cuba as part of a region-wide effort to reduce tensions in Central America and end almost 30 years of having a hostile nation militarily and economically dependent on the Soviet Union only 90 miles from our shores. I hope my visit to Cuba will contribute to improving the prospect for a normal relationship with Cuba.

INTRODUCTION

I have long been interested in United States relations with Cuba. I first went there after my election to the Senate in 1960. I returned from that trip with the conclusion that CIA activity was not productive and that what became the Bay of Pigs invasion would not work because Castro had the support of the great majority of the Cuban people. Those who might have supported an invasion, I said, had either fled Cuba, were dead, or were in prison. I conveyed my recommendations to the CIA, but my advice was ignored. (Subsequently, after the debacle at the Bay of Pigs, President John F. Kennedy chided me for not bringing my recommendations to him personally. I wish I had persisted in trying to do so.) I traveled to Cuba again in 1974 with the late Senator Jacob Javits. In the

report we issued after the trip we concluded that the time was ready for a better relationship with Cuba. United States objections to Cuba's role in Africa, primarily the presence of Cuban troops in Angola, was a principal factor in the lack of progress then.

I return from this trip believing once again that it is an appropriate time to move toward a more rational and normal relationship with Cuba. The international climate has changed; peace is bursting out in many parts of the world. There is a settlement in Angola including the withdrawal of Cuban troops as part of a negotiated agreement in which the United States has played a key role; the Soviets are committed to withdrawing from Afghanistan, regional settlements are in prospect in Cambodia and Western Sahara, and United States-Soviet relations are much improved. Our relationship with Cuba should be viewed within this new international context.

Recommendations

Begin With Small Steps To Improve the Climate

During my 3½-hour late night meeting with President Castro and in lengthy meetings with Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriquez and Minister of Education Jose Fernandez, the Cubans expressed positive interest in my proposal that Cuba and the United States began to take a series of relatively small mutually beneficial steps, leading toward an improvement in relations. In addition to resolving specific problems, these modest actions would help to create the climate of goodwill and trust within which the more difficult and complex issues such as Central America and the U.S. trade embargo could be discussed, with the objective of moving toward a normal relationship.

Cuba Release the Remaining "Plantados" and the Other Political Prisoners

I suggested that the process could start by dealing with humanitarian concerns. Cuba could show its good faith by releasing the remaining four "plantados," who still will be in prison after the other five, now being processed for release, are given their freedom. As a further step, the Cubans could release the approximately 200 to 300 other remaining political prisoners. I was touched most deeply during my meeting with the nine plantados in the Combinado del Este prison. These strong-willed and proud men, out of respect for their visitor, wore pajamas rather than their usual dress of underwear, worn in defiant refusal to wear the regular prison garb. Their resolve and unwavering resistance to the government's attempts to reintegrate them into Cuban society after, in several of the cases, over 27, 26, and 24 years in prison, is a remarkable testimonial to the human spirit. Their release would go far in setting the stage for a series of mutually beneficial actions.

The United States Lift the Embargo on Medicines

For our part, as a humanitarian gesture, I would be prepared to introduce legislation to lift the embargo on medicines and medical supplies and equipment. Cuba manufactures 85 percent of its own pharmaceuticals, but in many cases the processes depend on im-

ported materials and equipment. I was struck by the fact that the medical research equipment used in the impressive high technology Institute of Genetic Engineering, where significant cancer research is being undertaken and genetic materials are being developed, was of Japanese, Swedish, and German manufacture. Better quality and less expensive equipment, especially in terms of shipping costs, is available in the United States. Officials at the institute are knowledgeable about developments in the field in the United States and have welcomed their contacts, thus far limited, with doctors and scientists at various medical research centers in the United States.

Cuba Permit Access to American/Cuban Dual Nationals in Prison

During my meetings with Cuban officials, I asked that the staff of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana be given regular access to the four to five dual nationals now being held in Cuban prisons, as a humanitarian gesture.

Both Countries Facilitate Cultural and Other Exchanges; Liberalize Visa and Travel Policy

Measures by both governments to increase cultural, sports, and educational exchanges would be relatively easy to adopt. In the past several years there have been exchanges but they have been sporadic and subject to arbitrary decisions on visa approvals. Cubans working in cultural and medical fields repeatedly told me of their frustration and disappointment at not being able to attend a professional function to which they had been invited in the United States because their visa requests had been denied or not approved on time. In many cases they receive no response whatever to their applications. It was gratifying to hear expressions of admiration and respect for their American counterparts and the work being done in this country in their fields as a result of the occasional visits that have been permitted.

In this spirit, the prohibition on travel of American citizens to Cuba should be removed. Only limited categories of United States citizens are permitted to go to Cuba as a result of United States visa restrictions and provisions of the United States embargo which prohibit the expenditure of United States dollars in Cuba. These travel restrictions appear to me to fly in the face of the principles of openness that we have urged on the Soviet Union and its allies in the Helsinki conferences.

Mr. Fernandez Retamar, head of the Cuban Government's Casa de las Americas (House of the Americas), expressed interest in the idea of sending an exhibition of Cuban art to the United States and receiving a similar one in Havana. I offered to contact the Rhode Island School of Design or museums in Rhode Island to see if there would be interest in participating in such exhibitions. The Cubans also are interested in a sports exchange with the University of Rhode Island and will be contacting the University's Institute of International Sport. Vice Minister of Sport Alberto Juantorena, Olympic recordholder in track, attended a program at the university this past summer.

I would like to see a more open visa policy to facilitate such exchanges. I also recommend that the Interests Sections in both

Havana and Washington each dedicate a staff person to full-time work in the exchange area.

Cuba Continue Positive Developments in Human Rights; Grant Official Status to Human Rights Groups

I am convinced that increased visits, which would go hand in hand with an improving relationship with Cuba, would have a positive impact on the human rights situation. This was affirmed by the various religious leaders with whom I spoke. The human rights situation has improved, particularly in regard to the release of political prisoners, in large part in response to the focus on Cuba by the international human rights community which has sent various missions to Cuba. Conditions at the Combinado del Este prison outside of Havana indicate positive responses to this attention by the international community. The "plantados" looked to be in reasonably good shape, and they told me that the last serious case of maltreatment was last May. The metal plates that covered part of the doors in the cells in the "Rectangle of Death" disciplinary block and in the cell block where the plantados are held have been removed, thus permitting more air and light. The outside doors in front of each cell in the "Rectangle of Death" also have been removed. I was able to observe ordinary prisoners meeting with their family members and walked through the 26-room conjugal visiting area, where the wives of prisoners were waiting for their husbands. About the time of my visit the government, in a move not yet announced to most of the religious community but worked out with the Catholic Church, agreed to permit visits by clergy to their communicants and adherents in prison.

The fact that the Cuban Government now tolerates the existence of small but important human rights groups is a positive development. Today there exists the Cuban Committee for Human Rights, the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, the Cuban Human Rights Party, and one or two groups of artists critical of the government. There is still, however, much room for improvement on the human rights front. Members of these organizations function in less than free conditions and are subject to harassment. Cubans in general do not have the right to freely assemble, to conduct open meetings, or to openly criticize the government. There are reports that some human rights leaders who have met with the international visitors have met with bad treatment.

Explaining the importance of human rights as a component of United States foreign policy, I urged the Cuban Government to take a more enlightened approach toward these groups. Official recognition of their status within Cuban society would certainly improve Cuba's relationship with the international human rights community. In addition, I recommended that the Cuban Government not place obstacles in the way of meetings between the human rights activists and visiting Members of Congress. I further recommend that the Cuban Government grant regular access for visits to Cuba by the international human rights organizations.

Both Countries Facilitate Increased Contact Between the Exile Community and Family Members in Cuba; Improve Phone System

I believe increased contact should be facilitated between the Cuban exile community in the United States and their family

members in Cuba. Although there have been some improvements in travel and visa arrangements for family visits, there remain many restrictions. As a key step in facilitating increased communication between families, I recommend that the United States Government permit substantial improvement in the telephone system that currently severely restricts calls to and from Cuba. As anyone knows who has tried to telephone Cuba, many calls must be attempted before one is completed. Journalists trying to get their stories out of Cuba on my visit had to try repeatedly into the evening hours to reach their news desks in the United States. Part of the problem while we were there was related to the damage caused by a recent fire in the Havana central exchange. The longer term problem, however, has been the lack of telephone capacity as a result of the deterioration of the phone system. AT&T has been given permission to lay "used" telephone cable from the United States to Cuba, paid for out of funds collected from long-distance calls between the United States and Cuba but held in escrow in the United States. Under the embargo, none of the funds generated by such long-distance service may be shared with Cuba, as is the normal international practice. I recommend that in the interest of increased communication between the Cuban exiles and their families in Cuba the United States Government release these funds to make possible full improvement in telephone service.

In recent years, telephone calls from the United States to the Soviet Union have been a significant factor in bringing about the more open relationship now developing between the United States and the U.S.S.R. Similar phone links are available to Eastern European countries and China. Technology is not the problem; money and politics is. In the case of Cuba, I believe obstacles in the way of the improvement of phone communication between the United States and Cuba should be removed, and funds should be released to bring telephone service up to modern standards.

The United States and Cuban Coast Guard Increase Cooperation, Including Narcotics Interdiction

Increased cooperation between the United States and Cuban Coast Guard, especially in the area of narcotics, would be another mutually beneficial step. At present, there is limited cooperation by means of a communications link between the Coast Guard in Miami and the Border Guard in Havana, but it is principally used in search and rescue missions. The Cubans expressed interest in my suggestion that there be cooperation in the narcotics area, such as the sharing of information on suspected planes and ships transiting Cuban territory or airspace. Cuban officials denied involvement in drug trafficking, and I hope they will consider my suggestion that they do everything possible to clear the air of charges that were leveled against Cuba during the hearings held by the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on International Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations, and by the indictments in Florida. As an example of cooperation which can be expanded, the Cubans told me how a Cuban plane and a United States plane flew together in the eye of Hurricane Gilbert and exchanged information.

Cuba Adhere to the Neutrality Treaty Governing the Panama Canal

In response to my recommendation that Cuba sign the protocol demonstrating adherence to the Neutrality Treaty governing the Panama Canal, as the Soviet Union recently has done, President Castro gave positive indications of willingness to do so. The proposition is now under study.

The United States and Cuba Resume Broadcast Interference Talks

A further recommendation within the context of steps that can be undertaken now is for the United States to get back to the negotiating table with the Cubans over the radio interference problem. Mutually agreed upon frequencies will prevent the radio interference that takes place today in both the United States and Cuba. As part of the agreement, Cuba wants to be granted the right to broadcast into the United States, since the Radio Marti program is broadcasting into Cuba. I believe that if the radio interference question can be resolved, the Radio Marti program will be regarded as less of an irritant. I also recommend that the United States broadcast regular Spanish-language Voice of America programming to Cuba in conjunction with the Radio Marti program, as was required in the legislation passed by Congress in 1983.

The United States Reconsider the TV Marti Project

My objections to the proposal to establish TV Marti, voiced long before my trip, were reenforced by my discussions in Cuba. On its face, TV Marti will constitute intrusive broadcasting that the United States and other governments have long objected to when it is directed at them. It will interfere with TV reception in Cuba and in the southeastern United States. Its effect on existing broadcasting will be similar to the jamming we have long objected to in Eastern Europe and which has just been discontinued by the Soviet Union, even without taking into account whatever countermeasures Cuba may take. Commencement of TV Marti is sure to have wide-ranging international implications. European governments and broadcasting authorities have long worked to bar unwanted TV broadcasts into their territories. TV Marti, an expensive and questionable project, is not worth the damage it is sure to create.

Both Nations Begin Talks on Nuclear Safety and Environmental Issues

There are other small steps that can be undertaken including agreements on nuclear safety and environmental problems such as pollution and fisheries conservation.

Conclusion

The policies of both the United States and Cuba toward each other have become sterile; it is time to break the logjam. It will not be easy, but I believe we should make an effort to talk with each other about the many issues on the United States-Cuba agenda. My suggestion that the United States and Cuba begin with mutually beneficial small steps to prepare the climate for resolution of the more complex steps was positively received by Castro and the other officials with whom I met. It is my hope that if progress can be

made on these recommendations, this will provide the climate within which to begin discussions on the difficult problems such as Central America, the claims issue, and the embargo.

It is not in the best interests of the United States to have a hostile nation, heavily dependent on Soviet military and economic assistance, sitting 90 miles away. We should be working toward creating a relationship with Cuba that would better serve United States foreign policy interests, one that could result in reducing tensions in Central America and elsewhere. I do not foresee a particularly warm and friendly relationship with Cuba, but there is no reason why we should not have the same type of relationship with Cuba as we have with the East European Communist countries. They are about 5,000 miles away, not 90.

I hope that my visit to Cuba and discussions with President Castro and other Cuban officials, and my comments to ranking officials of the incoming Bush administration, will contribute to improving the climate so we can put almost three decades of confrontational and destructive relations behind us.

ITINERARY

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24

9:30 a.m.—Depart Andrews AFB.
12:15 p.m.—Arrive Jose Marti Airport, Havana. Greeted by Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Jose Viera and Chief, U.S. Interests Section, John Taylor.
2:30 p.m.—Briefing at U.S. Interests Section.
4:00 p.m.—Walking Tour of Old Havana.
7:30 p.m.—Thanksgiving Dinner at Taylor residence with representatives of the Diplomatic Corps.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 25

10:00 a.m.—Roberto Fernandez Retamar and Miguel Barnet, Casa de las Americas.
1:00 p.m.—Lunch with Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jose Viera, Riviera Hotel.
3:00 p.m.—Alberto Betancourt Roa, Vice Minister of Foreign Trade.
4:30 p.m.—Msgr. Pierre, Chargé, Vatican Pro-Nunciature, Embassy of the Holy See.
6:00 p.m.—Ecumenical Council of Cuba, Martin Luther King Center: Rev. Raul Suarez (Baptist), Bishop Emilio Hernandez (Episcopal), Rev. Oreste Gonzalez (Presbyterian).
8:45–12:15 a.m.—President Fidel Castro, Presidential Palace.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 26

8:30 a.m.—Combinado del Este Prison, Lt. Col. Rafael Guzman.
10:30 a.m.—Jose Carneado, Chief, Religious Affairs, Central Committee.
12:30 p.m.—Lunch with Archbishop Jaime Ortega and Msgr. Carlos de Cespedes, Taylor residence.
3:30 p.m.—Institute of Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology.

4:45 p.m.—Institute of Tropical Medicine.
6:00 p.m.—Jewish Community Leaders, Dr. Jose Miller, president.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27

9:30 a.m.—Episcopal Church Service.
11:00 a.m.—Visit to Havana neighborhood CDR.
12:30 p.m.—Visit to Niceto Perez Agricultural Cooperative near Guira de Melena, Havana Province.
7:00 p.m.—Jose Fernandez, Minister of Education, meeting at Ministry, dinner at La Zaragozana.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 28

9:00 a.m.—Vice Minister of Public Health, Dr. Jorge Antelo.
10:30 a.m.—Center for Production of Medical Equipment.
12:00 noon—Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez.
3:00 p.m.—Wrapup at U.S. Interests Section.
4:30 p.m.—Wrapup with Jose Delgado, Ministry of Foreign Relations.
6:00 p.m.—Depart Havana.
8:20 p.m.—Arrive Andrews AFB.

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